Water Resupply in the Light Infantry

CAPTAIN WILLIAM M. CONNOR, JR.

One of the most difficult logistical missions in light infantry is water resupply. These soldiers must have water to survive, but they must also carry what they drink. In cool weather, six quarts will last 24 hours. In hot weather, soldiers will drink more than eight quarts in 24 hours, which means they will have to be resupplied every 12 hours. From a battalion S-4's perspective, the difficulty is in making sure water gets to every soldier in a usable package.

When I was a battalion S-4 in the 2d Battalion, 27th Infantry, during a rotation at the Joint Readiness Training Center and all of the training for it, I learned a lot about water resupply.

There are various ways to resupply water in light infantry: One way is to deliver water cans to line companies with the logistical package (LOGPAC). The problem with this method is that the platoons and squads are usually spread out and performing missions. There is not time enough to distribute five-gallon cans and collect the empty cans during the short LOGPAC window. Soldiers have to carry them around until the next LOGPAC. Supply sergeants have to bring along at least 80 water cans so they can keep 40 with the company between LOGPACs (not counting cans that will be lost).

A second method is to use 50-gallon blivets during LOGPAC. But it is unrealistic for a company to use them, because all its soldiers must be brought to one location to fill their canteens.

The solution we came up with was to use six-gallon plastic milk containers, the milk bags used in the mess hall. We bought them empty from a milk company. More than 1,000 bags cost less than $800 in Hawaii and should be even less expensive in other areas. The 1,000 bags, which came with a sealed white tube attached, took up the space of a footlocker. To fill a bag with water, a soldier pops the tube off, puts water in, and replaces the tube. To fill a canteen from the bag, he cuts the end of the tube and water streams into the canteen.

We used the water bags for the first time during a brigade field training exercise. The one problem we had to solve was carrying the bags once they were filled. If they were not packaged, they were difficult to carry around and load. We wanted a package that was already part of the supply system and one that could be thrown away.

MRE (meals, ready to eat) boxes fit both of these needs. The support platoon put the MREs in trash bags in the brigade support area before bringing them out at LOGPAC, and then they put the full water bags in the MRE boxes. This worked very well. The boxes are easier to load and are intended to be thrown away when they're empty. When the LOGPAC was delivered, all the supply sergeant had to do was kick out the MRE boxes and the trash bags, which reduced our LOGPAC time.

Once the soldiers had been resupplied, they were able to treat everything delivered at LOGPAC like trash. They left it for pick-up and moved out.

There are some other benefits to water-bag resupply. The bag's two-ply plastic will not burst unless it is punctured by a sharp object, and it can be reused. A soldier can put any amount he wants in the bag and carry it in his rucksack like a five-quart blivet.

When the bags are in MRE boxes, they can easily be slingloaded. They can also be stacked inside aircraft. (We conducted five battalion air assaults in preparing for and conducting our JRTC rotation. We slingloaded or stacked water boxes with almost every air assault.) The same is not true of water blivets or cans. With water-bag resupply, it is easier to preposition or cache water. When prepositioning cans or blivets, there is always a concern that they will be left behind. With the water bags (at less than 80 cents each), there is no worry about leaving them behind. A unit can preposition bags in two different sites, knowing that only one of them will be used.

My recommendation is that the Army make water-bag resupply the standard for light units. If water bags were made to fit light infantry unit specifications, the resupply process would be easier for everyone and also save money. Anyone who has been to the JRTC knows that many water cans are lost or left behind in the boxes. During unit training, it's the same story. Water bags cost far less and can be reused if necessary, and soldiers can carry empty bags around if they have to. Another saving, both in dollars and in unit effectiveness, is in heat casualties, most of which occur because individual soldiers do not have access to enough water.

Water-bag resupply is the cheapest, most efficient way of getting water to the people who need it most—the light infantrymen at company level.

Captain William M. Connor, Jr., is assigned to the 2d Battalion, 27th Infantry, in Hawaii. He has served as a platoon leader, a rifle company executive officer, and a battalion S-4. He is a 1990 ROTC graduate of The Citadel.